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ABSTRACT

This action research was conducted during the counseling practicum for trainees from the Bachelor of Education (Guidance and Counseling) program from one of the local universities in Malaysia. There was a great concern about the attitudes of counseling practicum trainees. The assessment of their attitudes shows some levels of positiveness, but it cannot be denied that there are trainees with negative attitudes while conducting their practicum. Overcoming these attitudes at the grassroots level, while still in practicum would enable better Prepared trainees in their professional settings. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/JDM)

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Attitudes toward Counselling Practicum: An Implication for the Caring Attitude of Future Counsellors in Malaysia

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Abstract

This action research was conducted during the counselling practicum for trainees from the Bachelor of Education (Guidance and Counselling) programme from one of the local universities in Malaysia. There was a great concern on the attitudes of counselling practicum trainees. The assessment of their attitude shows some levels of positiveness but it cannot be denied that there are trainees with negative attitudes while conducting their practicum. Overcoming these attitudes at the grass-root level, while still in practicum would enable better products of the counselor education programme to be emplaced in their professional settings.

Introduction

Counseling services formally began as a formal student service in the 1960s. Its formal inception witnessed the formal training of school counselors in the year 1969 when the Ministry of Education cooperated with UNICEF. On this initial onslaught, two hundred and seventy-five secondary school teachers were involved. The primary objective of this training is to introduce secondary school teachers with the concepts of guidance and counselling. For the year 1974, 1,772 teachers were given courses of such nature. It was proposed by the Ministry of Education then, there should be one school counselor in every secondary school in the Malaysian Peninsula. As such, the guidance and counselling curriculum was also geared towards having the services in the Special Education curriculum and schools offering the Advanced General Certificate of Education.

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Teachers involved in the guidance and counseling services were given the option to teach fifty percent of their time and exempted from co-curriculum. They were given funds to finance the guidance and counseling activities. The service was given prime importance in school each having their own bulletin boards, a room to conduct counseling sessions, and exhibition area to display vocational and guidance materials for students and teachers consumption.

With such warm reception and eminent need in schools, the guidance and counseling program was given impetus. Training centers for counselors to be were given serious consideration by the Ministry of Education. The earliest training center was at a teachers' training college offering Special Certificate in Counselling in 1980. The National University of Malaysia with a one-year diploma program then followed it. By the year 1982, University Putra of Malaysia offered a four-year bachelors programme. The need for school counselors was on the rise that the Ministry of Education started having in-service training courses to develop school counselors.

There is a need to uncover the attitudes of practicum trainees. Through normal supervision hours, trainees were showing symptoms of disinterest in what they are doing. Trainees often give excuses to what they are doing and often complain that the site-supervisor in this case the school especially the principal is not cooperating with them. According to Combs (1986), the personal attitudes, or 'perceptual organization' of key practitioners are key elements that differentiate between more effective and less effective helpers in many of the human service professions. Counsellors' effectiveness is significantly related to cognitive flexibility – the ability to think and act simultaneously and appropriately in a given situation, and to dimensions of open-mindedness,

adaptability, and resistance to premature closure (Whiteley, Sprinthall, Mosher, & Donaghy, 1967: 227). McLeod and McLeod also commented that it might be helpful to quantify the relative importance of counsellor philosophy along side other factors such as skill in technique, self-awareness, level of adjustment, and so on.

Methodology

Objective of the study

The objective of the study is to survey the attitudes of practicum trainees while they are undergoing their counseling practicum in the secondary schools in the Peninsula of Malaysia.

Research design

This is a descriptive study conducted on 283 (this is the actual number of trainees that went out for their practicum in one particular year) counselling practicum trainees to survey and ascertain their level of attitudes worth in the development of caring counsellors.

Instrumentation

Data for the research were obtained by self-report questionnaires administered to the practicum trainees while they were on-site supervision. The researcher assessing their attitudes constructed the questionnaire. In the context of the research, attitude refers to three components, i.e. (a) trainees' feelings toward the practicum, (b) trainees' involvement during practicum, and (c) trainees' overall performance during practicum. These measures are subject to the amount of cooperation tendered by the practicum sites namely secondary schools in the Peninsula Malaysia, trainees' management of the practicum, and the supervision they received from their supervisors.

Results and Discussion

Feelings toward Practium

The level of interest, felt being pressured, sense of responsibility, boredom, confidence, anxieties and worries, and level of acceptance for undergoing practicum were denominators of the trainees' feelings toward practicum. Practicum trainees have high levels of interests toward practicum (92%), sense of responsibility (96%), confidence (92%), acceptance for undergoing practicum (96%), no anxieties and worries (86%), felt not being pressured (75%), and not bored (87%). The results indicated that trainees felt good about their practicum – a good sign to nurture the caring attitude to serve clients. What happens to the small number of trainees that have somewhat indicated that they are not feeling good about the practicum. Yet, they will graduate and be posted to schools to conduct the guidance and counselling services. What kind of counsellors will they be?

Trainees Involvement during Practicum

Trainees' involvements during the practicum were measured by looking into trainees' voluntary involvement and commitment while on-site, level of independence, level of energy, initiative, support received during practicum, creativity, and open-mindedness. Trainees have high levels of commitment and involvement in the practicum (97%), level of independence (54%), level of energy (90%), level of initiative (88%), support received (93%), creativity (86%), and open-mindedness (93%). The results indicated that trainees involvement during the practicum were quite favourable. But then again, there are small numbers of trainees that have indicated a condition that warrants a certain level of inquiry as to what really made the trainees quite dependent, lack of

initiative, creativity, and energy. The practicum is actually a field experience that should be optimized by trainees and such feelings and level of involvement should not exist.

Overall Practicum Performance

The practicum trainees were sought for their overall practicum performance. The indicators for the overall practicum performance were measured by ability to improve themselves, confidence to perform as counsellors, able to gain exposure and experience, level of expectations, spontaneity, skills as counsellor, and relationship or networking. The results indicated that trainees felt that they were able to improve themselves (91%), confident as counsellors (86%), able to gain experience and exposure (89%), able to achieve a certain level of expectations (87%), spontaneity towards practicum (97%), skilful as counsellors (85%), and successful in relationship and networking (89%). The results indicated that though a majority of the responses were positive, there still is room to enquire about the rest!

Positive and Caring Counsellors

There is no doubt that most of the practicum trainees have indicated positiveness towards the practicum, which were good indicators towards the development of caring counsellors. The writer hopes they will undertake the task of counselling and guidance personnel in the schools effectively and efficiently to meet the various crying demands of the student population. When these counsellors have indicated positiveness, we at the counsellor educators' continuum would hope the best is about to happen. The worrying part that needs concern and attention is the few trainees that indicated attitudes otherwise. They will still be emplaced in the school settings and would assume counselling and

guidance personnel roles but their attitude is unbecoming. What do we do with this lot? - the impaired counsellors.

What Do We Do with Impaired Counsellors? - The Answers to Develop Caring Counsellors

Can those who somewhat lacked in feelings and involvement above be called impaired counsellors? According to Witmer and Young (1996) impairment relates to an absent of a positive state of health in counsellors – a wellness philosophy in the counselling profession. Through the observation of the writer, quite often there are a considerable number of practicum trainees that do not show any professional interest in their practicum. They are unmotivated and would often give excuses to suggestions made to them. They still survived the practicum, but the attitudes that they carry around with them are unbecoming – disturbing to the conscience of their supervisors. Will they be caring counsellors who can actually perform the demanding tasks of counselling profession?

What ought to be done to prevent impaired counsellors be placed on schools and could actually worsen the state of the art of the counselling profession? The wellness philosophy as suggested by Witmer and Young (1996) suggested that:

1. there ought to be careful selection of students and faculty into the counselling program – a significant number of students who are attracted to the psychology and counselling programs appear to have serious personality or adjustment problems (Deutsch, 1985; White & Franzoni, 1990).
2. selection and retention policy – based on well-being philosophy to include student and faculty statements on personal adjustment and wellness; regular review of

students' progress; discussing students' attitudes and at risk behaviours; joint evaluation between student-faculty and faculty-faculty; and retention, probation, and dismissal policies.

3. infused curriculum with wellness philosophy – to include legal and ethical responsibilities; opportunities to enhance personal growth and development; requiring counselling and personal growth experience; knowledge and skills to cope with stress, burnout, and impairment; and assess one's vulnerabilities during practicum or internship with one's supervisor.
4. faculty leadership – to create a wellness community and serve as role models for professional behaviour (ACA, 1995, F.1.a.). Components of wellness community to include compassion, commitment, leadership, involvement, creative problem solving, open honest communication, and autonomy.
5. portfolio – to focus on personal development and self-evaluation.
6. wellness model of self-assessment and program development based on the models of Travis (1988), Travis and Ryan (1988), Sweeney and Witmer (1991), and Witmer and Sweeny (1992). Witmer and Young (1996) suggested that the wellness model to include elements of spiritual, intellectual, emotional, physical, occupational, and social components.
7. requirements of clinical practice – to include continuing education; clinician responsibilities, prevent burnout, report unethical behaviours, and social support.

The writer staunchly believes that the wellness philosophy be implemented in the counsellor education program and that all counsellor educators advocate for such calls.

Conclusion

There is a sudden strife to demand many counsellors in Malaysia today. The level of social problems initiated by the school-going population has come to a shocking state. Secondary school children as well as the primary and religious school children are getting themselves involved in many of these mishaps. It has been suggested by the Ministry of Education that for every 500 students in any secondary or primary school, there should be one counsellor attending to the needs of these students. This is a changing feature in the Malaysian school system. There used to be only one counsellor to service an entire secondary school and none at all for the primary school. This urgency to attend to the matters of the school-going population warrants counsellors to be caring enough in their profession. If they were impaired, the result would be more chaotic.

The practicum is then a field experience to optimize the counselling learning process – to become a person, a counsellor, and a professional – this would be then 'coming together for a caring society'. The writer felt that it is the godly duty of every person to maintain normal relations (in their specific social roles) with other human beings especially those who are related to him/her in blood, neighbourhood, and responsibilities. The secret to optimum mental health lies in observing these rights and obligations. A healthy, wellness, and caring counsellor is one who fulfills his or her personal obligations to the best of his/her ability. This code of conduct can be found Sura[i] Nahl[ii] (The Bee: 90, Quran):

> *"God commands justice, the doing of good, and liberality to kith and kin and He forbids all shameful deeds and injustice and rebellion; He instructs you that ye may receive admonition".*

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[i] chapters in the Quran: there are 114 chapters

[ii] this is the 90th chapter in the Quran